by MARIJANE NELSON / AOPA 461469

Flying with Military Aero Clubs

. . . a member's look at who they're for, how they work, and what they can teach civilians

■■ The story would catch any pilot's eye. The picture shows a proud mom and dad, standing next to their son in front of a Navy jet. Their son has just completed Navy flight school at an estimated cost of $300,000. "And it didn't cost us a cent!" the father exclaims.

It's enough to make a reader leap for the yellow pages to look up the nearest recruiter. But how many of us would meet the stringent requirements for acceptance to military flight school?

There is, however, a less prestigious flying corps that the recruiters don't advertise. The Military Aero Clubs Assn. estimates that more than 19,000 pilots are acquiring their flight training and enjoying recreational flying with aero clubs throughout the world.

Rumor has it that military flying clubs got their start from Gen. Curtis LeMay, of Strategic Air Command fame. As the story goes, two young airmen at Nebraska's Offutt Air Force Base had salvaged a wrecked plane which they planned to rebuild in the back of a hangar for use in learning to fly. Luckily for them, General LeMay didn't have the predictable reaction when he learned of their scheme. He gave his blessing to their desire for flight, but said there'd be no more furtive construction. An aero club was started so that flight training could be conducted safely and efficiently.

LeMay's interest eventually led to official recognition of the aero club program by the Air Force in 1955. The stated purpose of Air Force aero clubs is to make it possible for eligible personnel to enjoy safe, low-cost light-aircraft operation while developing skills in aeronautics and an appreciation of aviation requirements and techniques.

"Eligible personnel" means practically anyone associated with the military—federal government employees working on military installations, Department of Defense personnel, retired servicemen, and dependents—in addition to those on active duty.

The members of this nonjet set must be willing to pitch in and do the work themselves in order to keep costs low. Returning from a flight, they are expected to refuel the plane, add oil, wash the windshield, push the plane back to its tiedown spot, secure it, and fill out the paperwork.

Members at many clubs form work groups for such chores as cleaning the club house and washing the airplanes. Each club elects an all-volunteer force to serve as its board of governors, generally comprising a president, vice-president, secretary, and officers in charge of operations, supply, safety, training, and maintenance. Each club must have a manager, who is a full-time employee paid from aero club revenues.

The 56 Air Force aero clubs are supervised by the Directorate of Morale, Welfare, and Recreation at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas. Maj. Lowell V. Thomas, chief of Air Force aero clubs, and MSgt. Jim A. Syfrett, his assistant, are responsible for providing guidance to the clubs and seeing that they operate in accordance with Air Force directives.

I recently had an opportunity to discuss the operation of the Air Force clubs with Sergeant Syfrett, who told me that in 1974 they had an accident rate of 5.3 per 100,000 flying hours, compared with 14.1 per 100,000 flying hours for general aviation. He attributed this impressive record to the aero clubs' improved management, better maintenance, currency requirements, and required monthly safety briefings for members.

Aircraft utilization is a problem common to all aero clubs

Bob and Eloise Habekost tour the Norton AFB control tower as part of their orientation in the aero club's ground school. Photo by Bob Wickley.

and, since each member has a personal stake in the club's financial well-being, I asked Sergeant Syfrett what he considered the best ratio of members per aircraft. "As a rule of thumb," he said, "we recommend 25 members per aircraft and a utilization of 65 hours per month, but 50 hours per month per aircraft is a more realistic goal."

Considering the variety of flying that takes place in aero clubs, I could appreciate the difficulty of deciding how many members there should be for each plane—and the factors to be considered in selecting equipment. Out of a total membership of 6,955 for 1974, aero clubs had to meet the needs of 2,999 student pilots, 1,797 private pilots, 1,635 commercial pilots, and 524 instructors.

The manager of the aero club at Norton Air Force Base, California, is Kenneth Herman (AOPA 151344), a retired USAF colonel who has been active in aero clubs since 1958.

Since taking over management of the Norton club in 1971, Colonel Herman has worked to make the fleet as modern as is economically feasible and has encouraged standardization of type and model when new aircraft are purchased.

"Many members would like to have a variety of aircraft at their disposal," he noted, "but this can be an expensive proposition. Most of the leading aircraft manufacturers offer a range of airplanes appropriate for the primary, intermediate, and advanced pilot. This assures both faster and safer progress in training. Our use of the Cessna 150 and Cessna 172 has resulted in great savings to the club because of the commonality of parts; we can go to one supplier and get a maximum discount and better service."

The Norton Aero Club operates a surplus Beech T-34, which is the pride and joy of some of the club members—including Colonel Herman. But as much as he loves to fly the plane, he is quick to point out its drawbacks: "Cost and safety are the two big factors in favor of keeping a modern fleet. Although our Beech T-34 is surplus from the Air Force and we're not making any payments on it, it's expensive to operate because parts are in short supply and hard to obtain. When I first came to the Norton club, the T-34 had been sitting on the flight line for a year and a half because it needed new canopies and they couldn't find a set. Now we need a new fuel selector, but Beech says it would have to be rebuilt—at a cost of $3,500. And labor for maintenance of the plane and its radios is expensive."

Aero club aircraft are subject to the same maintenance requirements as rental aircraft at fixed-base operations: 100-hour inspections, annual airworthiness certification, and compliance with airworthiness directives. All maintenance must be performed by FAA certificated A&P mechanics, who may be hired as club employees, or the work can be contracted to a local FBO.

A combined fleet of four Cessna 150s and two Cessna 172s provides Norton club members with the flexibility needed to conduct training and with cross-country capability. The T-34 satisfies the needs of the "sport aviator."

Initiation fees and monthly dues at the Norton club are fairly typical of those throughout the aero club system: $25 to join, and $8 monthly. This income helps defray expenses not covered by aircraft rental rates (which range from 30% to 40% below the wet rates at local FBOs). The hourly aircraft rental rates are based on the direct costs of operating a specific plane (cost of inspections and maintenance must be added to the more apparent expense of fuel and oil).

Many people don't feel the cheaper rates are worth the extra effort and strict regulations associated with belonging to a military aero club. The most commonly voiced complaint I've heard in the Air Force clubs I've flown with is the restriction on passengers. Members are prohibited from carrying any passengers on recreational flights who are not either aero club members or the dependents, spouse, children, mother, father, brothers, or sisters of an aero club member. (The sponsor must also be aboard.)

The Travis AFB Aero Club recently submitted a recommendation to Military Air Command headquarters that club members should be permitted to carry passengers of their choice. The rationale for the recommendation's disapproval was that the present passenger restrictions have reduced accident rates and fatalities. The policy is further justified on the ground that lifting passenger restrictions would ultimately result in numerous lawsuits and exorbitant insurance rates.

(During the years 1958–1960, when passengers were not restricted, Air Force aero clubs suffered from a high accident and fatality rate. The conclusion seems to be that the passenger factor was at fault. More efficient management and use of modern, more suitable aircraft—rather than the surplus planes commonly used at that time—should also be considered contributing factors to the improved safety record.)

Most aero club instructors maintain a positive attitude when coping with complaints about regulations. Col. William

E. Gifford (AOPA 282598) was president of the Norton Aero Club prior to his retirement, and he continues to be actively involved as a ground-school and flight instructor. Norton requires an annual standardization check flight for all member pilots, and the private pilot with less than 200 hours must make five landings and log at least one hour of flight time every 60 days before he can carry passengers or fly solo.

"Our standards for maintaining currency are more stringent than FAA requirements," Colonel Gifford says, "but the resulting proficiency of our members has resulted in an excellent safety record—at a savings in cost to our club. We are also fortunate that our instructors are willing to fly for $6 an hour—a lower rate than at most commercial operations—because they feel that members will use that money they've saved to do more flying.

"Our other regulations also help keep costs down," Gifford continued. "Our security measures, such as control of aircraft keys, and the great emphasis placed on tiedown procedures following each flight are a means of protecting the planes from the elements as well as the thief."

Toni Torres, chief flight instructor at the El Toro Marine Aero Club, preflights a Cessna 150 with her student, Sgt. Bryan Gunderson, USMC. Photo by the author.

I found that regulations established by the Air Force do not necessarily pertain to aero clubs operated by other branches of the service. I visited the El Toro Marine Aero Club, near Santa Ana, Calif., and found that they do not have the passenger restriction.

The El Toro club's diverse fleet includes a twin-engine Apache, a Beech T-34B, and a Cessna Aerobat, and they have an instructor on the staff who specializes in teaching aerobatics. They had completed well over 16,000 accident-free hours at the time of my visit.

While I was there I had an opportunity to talk to another gentleman who is quite knowledgeable about the operation of aero clubs for all branches of the service. Cdr. T. C. Steckbauer (AOPA 352396) has been affiliated with Navy flying clubs since 1967 and was instrumental in founding the Military Aero Clubs Assn.

Since its inception in 1972, MACA has provided a focal point for information exchange through its newsletter and and annual symposiums, and has worked to obtain discounts for aero clubs on such things as aircraft, parts, supplies, and insurance. Commander Steckbauer was president of the organization until his retirement from the Navy in spring 1973, and has been its executive director since that time.

"Probably the single most important piece of advice I could give to flying clubs regarding management," he said, "is to have a financial plan and an accounting system that will provide accurate and timely data on which to base action. In the area of operations, all clubs should have checkout and training systems to insure that members are kept current and provided with a good aviation education."

Recognizing that all military aero clubs must cope with the problem of frequent transfer of personnel (flight instructors, management, etc.), MACA recommends that the clubs utilize professionally prepared programs that can be carried on regardless of changes in staff.

Many aero clubs have found the AOPA Air Safety Foundation's Sky=Safe ground and flight review checklists an aid for conducting flight reviews.

MACA has also formed guidelines as to whether a military aero club should lease, lease/buy, or buy its aircraft.

For a new club without a cash reserve, an inexpensive way to get started is to lease a plane from a club member (with resulting advantages both to the investor and the club) or make a lease/buy arrangement with a manufacturer (with the option to buy at any time). If a club has the income, perhaps through initiation fees, to make the downpayment on an airplane, then it will benefit by eventually becoming an owner, rather than letting the equity accrue to an individual member or a leasing company.

During my conversation with Commander Steckbauer, I expressed regret at the hostile attitude some FBOs have toward the aero clubs.

"I know what you mean," he replied, "and I think complaints of unfair competition from FBOs are not justified; they are not looking at the long-range advantages the aero clubs have for them.

"Many pilots would never have been able to afford primary flight training except through the service clubs," he continued. "When these people leave the service, they may go to an FBO to get advanced ratings on the GI Bill, or just continue with their recreational flying and be potential buyers of aircraft and equipment."

I sighed in agreement. Unless the Navy signs me on for its $300,000 flight-training program, I'm stuck with trying to get on my aero club's schedule, doing without the services of a lineboy when I return from a flight, and keeping current on the regulations.

It's not perfect—but it's one way to keep flying within my budget. □